

Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories

Metis Association of the Northwest Territories

"The Dene Political System"

Summary of evidence of

GEORGE BARNABY

before the

MACKENZIE VALLEY PIPELINE INQUIRY

YELLOWKNIFE, N.W.T.

April, 1976

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The Land Claim of the Dene is a claim not only for land but also for Political rights. Up to this time the native people have had no say in what happens on their land. Everything has been decided by Ottawa or a few people in Yellowknife. This does not apply to development on the land only, but also in the way we live. Laws are made by people from the south that do not make sense to us, but which we have to live by. These laws are to serve the system of the south. They are not laws to protect the Dene way of life.

The Land Claim is our fight to gain recognition as a different group of people -- with our own way of seeing things, our own values, our own life style, our own laws.

The Land Claims is a fight for self-determination using our own system with which we have survived till now. This system is based on community life. Whether it be a settlement or a trapping camp, whether people live by working in a wage economy or off the land, the laws we follow are concerned with all the people, not to benefit a few at the expense of the rest. Sharing with others is one of our laws. People are expected to share. The ones that have a lot always share with the rest of the people. A person will never have to go hungry, for instance, as other people will give what they could spare.

A person who could afford an outboard motor or skidoo helps someone who needs help to move out in the bush.

Respect for the old people is another law, since all the laws come from the teaching by our elders. From stories that give us pride in our culture, from training since we are young we learn what is expected of us. Without this learning from the elders our culture will be destroyed.

The way decisions are made is another law. No one can decide for another person, everyone is involved in a discussion, and the discussion made by everyone. Our way is to try and give freedom to a person, as he knows what he wants. When working, for instance, a person should not be forced into anything. Supposing he wants to go trapping for awhile, the system should be flexible enough to allow this. There should be a choice.

Our life is part of the land. We live on the land and are satisfied with what we get from it. No one person owns land, it belongs to all of us. We choose where we want to go and our choice is respected by others whether in the settlement or in the bush. We have no word in our language that means wilderness, as anywhere we go is our home. It does not make sense to destroy your home. People love to live in the bush, it is a part of our culture.

These are a few examples of the culture of the Dene, the system of government, the laws, the way they differ from the southern system and people. The Territorial Council is one place where Dene law is not respected at all. There is very little involvement by the people; the laws that are passed have no importance for the people, but they are forced to follow these laws. The whole system is from the south, and they are trying to fit us into it.

A lot of times the topics that are being discussed are not understood by all the Councillors. The effects of passing laws are not understood. The language that is used is not understood. The procedures and formality is confusing; most of the time, rather than look stupid, we just agree. As most of these discussions concern only the southerners, if they choose to live that way, it is up to them, I think.



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The first session I went to we spent two weeks on an Ordinance that had no importance to the people I represented. At this time I asked for more control for the communities. This was voted down. I don't know why. Since the Territories is a big land and people want different things in different places, one thing it might have done was reduce the size of the Territorial Government, as people would do more of the planning and carrying out of programs for themselves. But even if we all agreed, the final decision is up to the Commissioner or the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs.

At the second session of Council we talked of political development, where the Council would have authority over the whole north. I spoke against this, as it made no difference to the people who controlled it, it still would not give them any rights to decide for themselves. The power would be only to the Council to decide the future of the North, and people would be forced to follow, whether they agreed or not. I think it was a plan to keep the people oppressed. We would get a land claim but live under the laws of some one who has no concern for us or our wishes or our own laws.

In January of this year we went through the budgets for the Territorial Government. This budget was prepared by the Territorial Government and approved in Ottawa. We could not change any money from one program to another. All we could do was take it or leave it. We approved everything. At this time two motions were made regarding the pipeline. The first was the pipeline authority - that the Council should have input into this body. I argued at this time that the people concerned should have the control if there was to be any authority since they would be affected the most. This was brushed aside with the remark that no group should control the pipeline. So if the concern was not for the people of the north, I don't know what it was.

Second was that the Council support the building of the pipeline down the Mackenzie Valley. Here was a real example of oppression. Since the people had already stated their position about this project the Council was not speaking for them. What they wanted to do was to put down the stand against the pipeline. I don't know what the people from the Eastern Arctic were thinking when they voted in support, as they have no idea what is happening here. I would think as native people they would share the same concern for people that we do. What I said was that if they wanted a pipeline they could approve it on their own land, but not to force it on us. But hopefully they did not understand the whole issue and what it means to us.

At this time there were remarks made about this Inquiry that would make it look foolish, but I believe this is the first chance that people have had to really speak their mind; but apparently the Council does not want that; they don't want anyone speaking for themselves. They want to decide everything.

Sometimes I say, that if the Commissioner and the top executives were all trappers and hunters things would be different, but I see it would make no difference. As it is the system under which it runs, wherever only a few people decide for the rest of the population, it oppresses people.

Some people might think of the land claims as a racial issue, but it really is an issue between the ruled and the rulers, between the oppressed and the oppressors. Under Dene Law there is freedom and equality. The system from the south is oppression and exploitation, where a few have a lot and a lot of people have very little.

Where the Dene work together in time of need, the southern way is to exploit that need. Where the Dene share, only profit moves people in the southern system. Where the Dene Law gives freedom for the individual to do what he decides and take responsibility for his action, the system from the south passes an Ordinance which forces a person's action and takes away responsibility. Where our system is set up to serve the people, the people from the south serve their system.

The Dene Declaration clearly states that we are a nation of people with our own ways of governing ourselves, our own values, and life style. The land claim is our fight to survive as a nation and to decide our own future.

(Counsel will ask the witness a series of questions relating to the substance of the summary.)

APPENDIX A

WITNESS RESUME

George Barnaby

Present Position: Hunter and Trapper

Experience: Hunter and trapper since childhood.

1970-71 Co-op Manager
Colville Lake

1972-74 Settlement Secretary
Fort Good Hope

March 1975- Member
March 1976 Council of the Northwest
Territories

APPENDIX B

Reports etc. referred to or relied on

Council of the Northwest Territories Debates

--May, 1975; June, 1975; September, 1975; January, 1976; February, 1976

